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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and discusses the University of Alaska's language programs for Eskimo-Aleut languages like Yupik and Inupiaq, offered through its Alaska Native Language Center. The paper is critical of the program's over-emphasis on the emphasis on teaching grammar and vocabulary. It argues that, though well intentioned when the framework for these programs were laid in the 1960s and 1970s, this approach is no longer needed and inappropriate, given the advances in what is known about language pedagogy in the early 21st century. The focus on grammar originated in the desire to make these aboriginal languages just as "respectable" as European languages, which have elaborate rules and systems for grammar, and to mirror the way these languages were taught at the time. This paper investigates some of the assumptions and priorities that led to the development of these programs and relates them to changes in second language pedagogy. It argues that while second language acquisition research questions the centrality of grammatical instruction, grammar remains central to much of what happens in native language instruction for historical and social rather than pedagogical reasons. (KFT)

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ED 459 608

Why do we emphasize grammar? Grammatical Analysis, Language Teaching, and Teacher Training[1]

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INTRODUCTION

In order to better meet the needs of students and communities involved in language revitalization, faculty and staff of the Alaska Native Language Center and Program (ANLC/P) have developed several degree programs. Currently, in addition to individual language classes, ANLP offers certificate and AAS degrees in Native Language Education, a B.A. in either Yupik or Inupiaq, and (in conjunction with UAF's School of Education) an Endorsement in Native Language Education for certified teachers.[2] Finally, ANLC/P has begun developing interdisciplinary programs for students interested in earning a B.A. in one of Alaska's eleven Athabascan languages. Common to all these programs is the belief that to document, teach and train teachers for Alaska's Native languages, ANLC/P must not only provide access to training directly to local community members interested in teaching and research, but we must empower local communities, and most especially speakers, to become full partners in these efforts.

As both a research center focused on documentation and a language program focused on language teaching and teacher training, ANLC/P's language classes (like many around the country) were founded in the belief that formal language teaching and teacher training rely heavily on grammatical instruction, which in turn derives from grammatical description. Thus, the program assumed that adequate grammatical description necessarily precedes efficient second language teaching. This is not to say that program founders believed that language learning requires explicit grammatical instruction. It is generally understood that natural language learning occurs at home without grammatical explanations. However, it was (and to some degree still is) an assumption of the program that effective classroom instruction derives from an intimate and explicit knowledge of the grammatical structure of the language being taught.

This set of assumptions is heavily rooted in the priorities, needs, and second language pedagogy of the day. Before Alaska Native language programs were developed in the 1960's, Native languages often were viewed by the general public (and some University faculty and administrators) as worthy of study only as curiosities; they were not considered equal to well-established, orderly European languages. Thus a necessary goal of the time was to establish the credibility of Alaska Native languages as equal to European languages within the University, and by extension, within the k-12 school system of Alaska. To accomplish this, it was necessary to establish courses and course materials that closely mirrored the foreign language classes of the day.

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In this paper, I investigate some of the assumptions and priorities that led to the development of ANLP's Native language classes and programs, and relate these to changes in second language pedagogy. I suggest that the needs and limitations of the language programs as they were initially designed continue to influence and limit those programs today. In particular, I argue that while second language acquisition research questions the centrality of grammatical instruction, grammar remains central to much of what happens in the Native language classroom for historical and social, rather than pedagogical reasons.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this presentation was collected as part of a larger on-going case study being conducted by Patrick Marlow (ANLC/P) and Joan Parker Webster (UAF School of Education) focused on teacher, student and institutional attitudes toward language teaching and program development. The larger project draws on surveys, interviews with students and faculty, and classroom observations to define institutional and individual goals relating to indigenous language study. Our goals in this larger case study include: 1) determine whether institutional and individual goals are reconcilable; 2) investigate a set of appropriate roles and expectations for ANLC/P's role in language maintenance/revitalization; and 3) determine whether language classes impact individual willingness to be supportive of/become involved in language revitalization efforts. In this paper, I will focus my attention strictly on the role of grammatical instruction in language teaching and teacher training, its interaction with on-going documentation, and its impact on faculty and students within the program.

FOUNDATION

When ANLC/P was founded in 1972, bilingual education and the right to teach in a k-12 classroom using a language other than English was still a matter of debate. Starting in the late 1960's, prior to ANLC/P's founding, classes first in Central Alaskan Yupik grammar and then in Alaskan Inupiaq grammar were offered as linguistics classes through the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The purpose of these classes was both practical and political.

On the practical side, the courses were initially organized at the request of students at UAF (mostly Native speakers) interested in learning about the grammar of Yupik so that they themselves might one day teach using Yupik as a medium of instruction. At the time, this required that Yupik be provided with a practical orthography and that Yupik be shown to be capable of expressing the concepts and needs of classroom instruction. In other words, a university-level grammar course had to be developed and thereby Yupik had to be shown to be equivalent to European or traditional foreign languages.

On a purely political level, Krauss (pers. com. 2001) says:

> "We were preparing already by the mid to late 60's to try and get the language [Yupik] into the schools....We were trying to get ourselves ready—certain people would have said in the education administration of the state—for the 'overthrow' of

the authority that had prevailed with those anti-native language policies over all those decades, since the beginning of American education in the territory and then the state."

According to Krauss, the classes were initially designed as demonstrations in fieldwork in which Native speakers learned to analyze their innate grammar and non-speakers (mostly non-Native students at the time) were exposed to the language. While this initial class design was more the result of necessity rather than philosophy, the philosophy of language teaching that prevailed at the time saw no conflict in the courses serving this dual purpose. Speakers learned about grammar and were exposed to non-speakers trying to learn the language. For non-speakers, a typical college language course was (and at times still is) limited to increasing the student's cultural experience by teaching *about* language and about the grammar of the language. Students learned vocabulary and sentence structure, were taught (through the medium of English) the social, cultural, and pragmatic significance of saying things in certain ways. As far as non-speakers were concerned, the purpose of UAF's early Yupik language classes was not for the student to learn to speak the language, but to lay the groundwork so that if the student had the opportunity to spend a significant amount of time in a community in which the language was used, s/he would have the basis for acquiring the spoken language much more quickly, efficiently, accurately and extensively (Krauss, pers. com. 2001).

I would ascribe a third function for these linguistics classes. They were an opportunity for the linguist to share his/her love of linguistics and language with the students through a model of self-discovery and collective learning.

Under this model of language instruction, B.A. programs in both Yupik and Inupiaq developed quickly in the early 1970s, following the outlines of more traditional foreign language programs, and evolving ultimately into the Yupik and Inupiaq curricula that we have at UAF now. For the eleven Athabascan languages, however, B.A. programs were not possible for two reasons. First, the population size did not really warrant full B.A. programs—there just weren't enough students. Second and more interestingly, Krauss (pers. com. 2001) points out that the state of grammatical knowledge regarding Athabascan languages was insufficient, requiring far more work on the part of ANLC/P faculty and staff to develop the materials necessary for a traditional university-level language program. In short, given the limitations of the department and the state of documentation at the time, a multi-year program following the model of foreign language study just simply wasn't considered viable.

From the very beginning, UAF's Native language programs reinforced all three goals of the institution: teaching, teacher training, and documentation. They offered non-speakers an opportunity to learn *about* the language. They provided fluent speakers with an opportunity to receive explicit grammatical instruction—assumed to be a necessary step to be able to teach in a classroom. And, they provided linguists an opportunity to share what they had learned about the structure of the language. Further, these same programs quickly achieved the political goals set by the original faculty and students. Native language study was quickly recognized as equivalent

to foreign language study for the purposes of University of Alaska degree programs, and by 1972, Native language programs were required by state law for "...all Alaska schools which have 15 or more (now 8 or more) students whose primary language is other than English." (Krauss, 1980).[3]

ORAL LANGUAGE AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

In the thirty years since ANLP language programs were established, research into second language acquisition (itself a new field in the early 1970's) has resulted in considerable changes in second language teaching. Significantly, current research in language teaching and second language acquisition plays down grammatical instruction and favors communicative approaches to language instruction. Some even deny the necessity for explicit grammatical instruction as part of language teaching. (See Ellis 1985, Chapter 10 for a brief overview of many popular theories of second language acquisition).

For the purpose of this paper, I will restrict my comments to two commonly cited views on language teaching/learning—those put forward by Stephen Krashen (as presented in Krashen and Terrell 1983), and Rod Ellis (as presented in Ellis 1984.)

According to Krashen (Krashen and Terrell 1983), language **acquisition** (=learning a language) differs from language **learning** (=learning *about* the grammatical structure of a language) in a number of key ways. Acquisition leads to language proficiency, or the ability to use the language in conversation. "Learning," on the other hand, leads to the ability of the student to correct him/herself. However, this ability to correct oneself (=Monitoring) is limited to only those situations in which the student has enough time and energy to think about what s/he is about to say. In other words, learning is only useful in formal contexts (such as writing or speech making) where the student has time to plan what s/he wants to say.

Ellis (1984) presents a similar model of language learning. Ellis, like Krashen, recognizes a difference between planned and unplanned speaking. In unplanned speaking, the student must draw on knowledge that has become automatic (=has been "acquired" under Krashen's model). In planned speaking, on the other hand, the student can draw on both automatic and non-automatic knowledge (=Krashen's Monitor). The primary difference between Ellis and Krashen is that Ellis believes that non-automatic knowledge will become automatic over time through use. Krashen, in contrast, believes that non-automatic knowledge can never become automatic. Automatic knowledge derives only from continued exposure to the language.

Under either theory, explicit grammatical instruction (=Monitor/non-automatic knowledge) plays a supporting role in language learning. It seems more important to provide a language-rich environment in and out of the classroom, if the goal is student competence in speaking and understanding the language. This division between "acquisition/learning" or automatic/non-automatic knowledge may explain why some people seem to acquire native-like fluency in a second language without classroom instruction, while others struggle despite the support of organized classes.

ROLE OF INPUT

The questions that remain are:

1. How does a language teacher provide a language-rich environment in the classroom that is optimally targeted so that students acquire the language efficiently?

And related to this:

2. Does the teacher need to have an explicit knowledge of the grammar of the language in order to help students acquire the language efficiently?

Since a lot of second language acquisition research is focused on trying to answer these questions, I won't pretend to have a definitive answer to either question. Instead, I will take a few more minutes to make some remarks that I hope may lead us in the right direction.

EFFICIENT TEACHING

Krashen and Terrell (1983) argue that the best language data for a language student is language that is just beyond the student's current understanding. Krashen calls this i+1. In other words, the ideal teacher should know exactly what forms of the language (both in terms of the grammar and vocabulary) a student can control. Then, that teacher would speak to the student using targeted language that forces the student to stretch his/her abilities. This targeted language is referred to as **comprehensible input**.

In practical terms, Krashen recognizes that the average classroom contains students with varying abilities and learning speeds. This is especially true of Native language classes where students come from a wide variety of language backgrounds—some fluent or partial speakers, some able to understand but not speak the language, and others with no or little exposure to the language. In order for the teacher to overcome this hurdle, Krashen argues that the teacher must provide a wide enough variety of language data in the classroom so that for each student i+1 (comprehensible input) is achieved at least part of the time. The teacher does not have to target all of his or her language use perfectly. S/he just has to provide enough data, speak the language enough in the classroom, that ultimately each student receives sufficient comprehensible input that s/he can acquire it. The more targeted language used in the classroom, the better the student's chance of learning.

Under this model, explicit grammatical instruction should be limited and should not take away from time spent in class using the Native language. Ideally, all grammatical instruction should take place in the target language. Unfortunately, this is virtually impossible for most Alaska Native languages and English medium instruction becomes all but essential, at least for explicit grammatical instruction.

LANGUAGE TEACHING AT ANLP

It would be misleading to say that there has ever been an accepted model for Native language instruction at ANLP. While the initial classes were set up as grammar translation courses (and as such, they reinforced the sense that Alaska Native languages are rule-governed systems), once

the courses were established, instructors were largely given a free hand to develop their own curriculum and teaching styles. As a result, just as in most foreign language programs, classes evolved in many different directions under different instructors. Teaching models used in UAF's Native language classrooms have included everything from strict grammar-translation to fully communicative approaches advocated by Krashen, and everything in between.

Despite the free hand given to instructors, grammar instruction has remained central to much of what happens in the Native language classroom, often stifling the natural talents of the instructor. Consider the cases of Mary[4] and Maude.

Observations of Mary's classroom in the mid to late 1990's revealed an extremely stilted teaching style. Both the instructor and the students were bored. Classroom activities were based almost exclusively on rote memorization and repetition of disconnected and decontextualized conversations (the audio-lingual method), with grammatical explanations and directions to students given almost exclusively in English. It was clear that Mary did not like to teach grammar, and felt constrained by what she felt was expected of her. While she had a clear grasp of the basic grammatical concepts she used in class, she found the grammatical terminology foreign and confusing. As the linguist in the classroom, it quickly became my responsibility to provide the grammatical descriptions and explanations to the class, a role subsequently assumed by a second instructor.[5]

Over the next few years, Mary's class improved considerably. Freed from the need to provide explicit grammatical explanations and encouraged to explore and expand beyond the predetermined conversations, she is more in control of her classroom and more at ease with the material. Observations of her classroom reveal that she provides a significant amount of grammatical instruction through examples, including structured question/answer routines and conversations. In this way, she is able to provide partial and full verb paradigms and focus student attention on specific grammatical forms, without relying on overt grammatical instruction, and without shifting to English.

In Maude's case, the need to create appropriate grammar-based materials, and explanations that are understandable to the students continues to be the central task. In discussing the need to provide materials for her class, Maude tied her work directly to the need to provide documentation of her dialect:

> **Maude:** You have to teach the first year with the materials I have. And I've been making up my own—I've been here for six years now—for at least five years. Because I have that directive from the higher-ups, they want the XXX dialect, my dialect.
> **Interviewer:** The higher-ups?
> **Maude:** Well, Dr. Krauss was here, right? And they want that dialect, because, you know, he's for like documenting.
> **Interviewer:** Right. So what materials have you been working on, specifically?
> **Maude:** Oh, the grammar.

Interviewer: So, it's a grammar book?
Maude: It's a grammar book. Yeah.

Later in the same interview, Maude expressed her concerns about presenting grammar to her students.

Interviewer: What's the least useful? Something that you just, "I'll never do that again" or "I hate doing that but they make me do it."
Maude: Lots of lots of lots of grammar they can't grasp. If I write stuff all over the board, this is a first person singular, this is a conditional mood, this little "m" over here, and then you have to connect it with that thing over there. That kind of stuff is less useful by the way.

The situation is further complicated when we look at other demands placed on this instructor. Within a broader move toward a communicative approach to language instruction at ANLC/P, Maude has been encouraged time and again to move away from English medium instruction in the classroom. However, this conflicts with her sense of the need to provide explicit grammatical instruction to her students. As a result, the language of the classroom routinely reverts to English and the style of instruction becomes grammar-translation.

I want to be clear. Maude does not object to grammar instruction. She is convinced of its inherent value in helping students learn the language. Yet, there seems to be a conflict here between Maude's responsibility as a language teacher and as a would-be documenter of her language. She feels great pressure to provide a complete grammar that simultaneously satisfies the needs of the classroom and the needs of the archive. She feels this pressure despite, as Krauss (pers. comm. 2001) points out, the fact that instruction and documentation have historically been viewed by the ANLC/P administration as two different parts of the same job—parts that are not necessarily interdependent.

WHY CONTINUE TO EMPHASIZE GRAMMAR?

Why does Maude continue to emphasize grammar instruction, even when she is encouraged not to? I would maintain that there are at least three reasons for this. None of them have anything directly to do with language teaching, at least not in the narrow sense of helping students to acquire the spoken language.[6]

First, students expect it and demand it. It makes them comfortable and it assures them that the teacher knows what s/he is doing when they can answer a question about grammar. By extension, being able to explain grammar to students gives the teacher a certain status and respect in the classroom (but does not make the teacher necessarily more successful in getting students to speak or to speak properly).

Second, the goals of the language classroom go beyond proficiency in the language for the student. Language classes are designed not simply to produce speakers of the target language,

but to produce *educated* speakers—one whose knowledge of the language approximates that of an educated native speaker. Within the western academic tradition, this means the person must have some explicit understanding of grammatical forms. Anyone who has attended primary and secondary school has studied the grammar of his/her first language—not as a means to acquire the language, but as an attempt to reinforce the norms of a socially accepted dialect (both written and spoken). By extension, grammar must be taught to second language students at all levels, whether or not it has any impact on the level of proficiency reached by the student. This definition of the educated speaker is transferred to the Native language class as well, despite the fact that an educated speaker of a Native language (i.e., an elder) would traditionally have no training in the grammar of the language.

Third, explicit grammatical description is central to the training received by would-be language teachers. As a result, teachers may get the misimpression that grammatical description is expected of them in the classroom. It is worth noting that many Native language classes begin with a description of the sound system of the language that closely parallels the literacy instruction the teachers themselves received in preparation to teach. But there is no evidence that this sort of explicit phonetic explanation has any impact on the student's long-term ability to produce the sounds of the target language.

TEACHER TRAINING

Does the language teacher need instruction in grammar or not?

The simple answer is yes. Given the previous discussion, it is clear that teachers need to judge their students' abilities and adjust their own language use accordingly. Further, as evidenced by Mary, the ability to devise targeted lessons that focus student attention on related grammatical forms and vocabulary requires a fairly extensive understanding of grammatical structure. What is not clear, however, is whether or not an explicit understanding of grammar, the ability of teachers to fully isolate and label complicated grammatical forms, is really necessary. Certainly Mary is not comfortable doing this sort of linguistic analysis. But, she is more than capable of isolating grammatical patterns in the language and structuring lessons around these recurrent patterns. Does this mean that it is sufficient for the teacher to have a general knowledge of grammatical structure, and more importantly, a clear sense of what are simple and what are complex grammatical forms? This more limited grammatical knowledge, especially for lower level classes, would allow a teacher to focus student attention on basic grammatical forms and target language use in the classroom. It would not be sufficient, however, to allow the teacher to provide detailed grammatical description of his/her language.

Some would argue that in order for a teacher to focus a student's attention on form, in other words, in order to draw a student's attention to grammatical structures in the target language, a teacher must have control of those structures him/herself. I couldn't agree more. However, I would disagree with the claim that the teacher must be able to label those structures or even be able to contrast them in an explicit way with other forms in the language (i.e., recognize paradigmatic relationships as defined by linguists). All the teacher must be able to do is focus the attention on what is being said and what it means.

CONCLUSIONS

ANLC/P's language classes (like many around the country) were founded in the belief that language teaching and teacher training rely heavily on grammatical instruction, a belief that is heavily rooted in the priorities, needs, and second language pedagogy of the late 1960's. Over the last 30 years, research into second language acquisition has resulted in a shift away from direct grammar translation toward more communicative approaches to language teaching. Some of this research even denies the need for grammatical explanations to students all together. Despite these changes, however, grammar remains a central part of much of language teaching and teacher training. I have suggested that the central importance of grammar is really a social rather than a pedagogical issue; explicit grammatical explanations are not central to language acquisition in the classroom. If this is even partly correct, then it is time that we as linguists working with endangered language communities begin looking closely at the assumptions behind our teacher training and language teaching efforts and seek out models of language teaching that more accurately reflect the needs, goals, and talents found within those communities.

ENDNOTES

[1] This paper has been significantly revised from the original presentation. I want to thank Dr. Lawrence Kaplan and Dr. Michael E. Krauss for their comments and help in those revisions.

[2]Program delivery/development is supported by a U.S. Department of Education Title VII grant 1998—2003.

[3] It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the development or limitations of local school district language programs. While the quality and scope of such programs varies considerably from school to school throughout the state, many of these programs (especially within the Athabascan region) amount to little more than marginalized cultural enrichment programs with little support from teachers or administrators (Dementi-Leonard and Gilmore).

[4]All interview data is anonymous and names have been replaced in all transcript materials.

[5] This situation continues. Currently Mary works closely with a second instructor holding a B.A. in linguistics. The class is divided such that one hour a week students receive explicit grammatical instruction in English from the second instructor. The remaining four hours of class time is focused on whole-language instruction in the target language. This system has freed Mary from the pressure to incorporate explicit grammatical instruction into her class, something she was never comfortable with. At the same time students are given limited direct grammatical instruction.

[6] The potential causal effect of psychological trauma associated with language oppression and endangerment should also be acknowledged here. The fact that Maude and other language teachers have themselves suffered and survived direct attacks on their Native language, are now teachers of those languages, and to a very large extent are seen by other community members as the focus for language revitalization efforts, certainly impacts what goes on in the classroom. Unfortunately, a through investigation of such factors is beyond the scope of this brief paper.

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